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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 5687  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1625  
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 8455  
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0946  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 000724

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [ASEAN](#) [TH](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: EAP A/S HILL STRESSES ASEAN DEVELOPMENT, BURMA  
WITH ASEAN SECGEN SURIN

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Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (C) During a February 29 meeting with ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan, A/S Hill stressed the importance of strengthening ASEAN as an institution; this could in turn encourage the organization to address the situation in Burma, as well as other regional issues, such as North Korea. Supporting this position, Surin mentioned the possibility of ASEAN hosting a dinner for the North and South Koreans, to which he would also invite key interested governments, including the U.S. Regarding Burma, Surin stressed the importance of continued engagement with both China and ASEAN, as they each had an important role to play. Both sides emphasized that U.S.-ASEAN engagements should not just focus on Burma. End Summary.

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REGIONAL VALUE OF A STRONGER ASEAN  
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¶2. (C) Assistant Secretary for East Asia and Pacific Affairs Christopher R. Hill joined Ambassador John, U.S. Pacific Commander Admiral Keating, and Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asia and Pacific Affairs Scot Marciel, on February 9 for a meeting with ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan, Former

Deputy Foreign Minister Sukhumbhand Paribatra, and Poj Aramwattananont, Counselor to the ASEAN Secretary General.

13. (C) A/S Hill emphasized the need to focus on strengthening ASEAN as an institution in order to improve its ability to act as a regional leader. Hill recognized that the trend in ASEAN was a movement towards democracy, open markets, and overall improvement in standards, all of which would ultimately benefit the region. Surin agreed, and stressed that as ASEAN continued to evolve, it would gain added influence over members and other regional players. A/S Hill's underlining of the need to strengthen ASEAN institutions was well-received by Surin, who also welcomed the appointment of the first U.S.-ASEAN Ambassador. Both sides emphasized that U.S.-ASEAN engagements should not just focus on Burma.

14. (C) President Bush's recent nomination of DAS Marciel to be Ambassador for ASEAN affairs was part of this effort to further support ASEAN, A/S Hill added. Surin pointed out that the U.S. was the first dialogue partner to appoint an Ambassador to ASEAN and that this move would encourage other partners to follow suit. Admiral Keating stated that the U.S. military would continue to engage ASEAN on a number of levels, including participation in various ASEAN events as a way to enhance PACOM's understanding and interaction with the institution. Hill described proposals regarding the establishment of a Northeast Asia Peace and Security Mechanism stemming from the Six-Party Talks, and added that while the role of ARF and ASEAN in such an undertaking was not yet clear, ASEAN could have a lot to offer.

15. (C) Surin mentioned that in recent weeks the South Koreans had privately approached him with the idea of ASEAN

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hosting a dinner to discuss the North Korean nuclear issue. According to the South Koreans, ASEAN's long-standing policy of noninterference would allow it to act as a neutral host for the ensuing discussion between North and South Korea as well as the members of the Six-Party Talks. Surin characterized the dinner as a "Friends of Korea" gathering. A/S Hill agreed that this was a good idea and expressed his interest in coordinating his upcoming travel to the region in April in order to attend such a meeting.

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BURMA INFECTING ASEAN RELATIONS  
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16. (C) A/S Hill explained to Surin that the situation in Burma continued to complicate U.S. dealings with ASEAN and that the USG wanted to find a way to address this dynamic. Surin lamented that Burma had had the same effect on ASEAN's relationship with other dialogue partners such as the EU, New Zealand and Australia. He continued that it was difficult for ASEAN to extricate itself from this particular problem, even as the institution witnessed missed opportunities such as Secretary Rice's participation in recent ASEAN Ministerial meetings and the indefinite postponement of President Bush's invitation of ASEAN Prime Ministers to Texas.

17. (C) ASEAN had tried to explore creative solutions. By way of example, Surin described his invitation to New Zealand to a recent Ministerial at ASEAN's expense to allow the GONZ to participate without having to explain why it used public funds to attend a meeting that included Burmese officials. The problem extended to intersessional activities, Surin noted, as dialogue partners led many of those important initiatives. A/S Hill inquired if ASEAN had ever seriously discussed the possibility of suspending Burma, or holding the GOB otherwise accountable for its actions. Surin replied that members had privately discussed Burma's suspension, but because there existed no legal way to impose such a penalty the conversations never moved beyond

quiet political pondering. Even the idea of a "minus one" procedure was not viable in the case of Burma due to ASEAN's highly ingrained adherence to the principles of consensus and non-interference.

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ROLE OF CHINA IN BURMA  
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¶8. (C) Prime Minister Samak had mentioned Thailand's interest in a dialogue on Burma similar to the Six-Party Talks on North Korea, noted Ambassador John, asking whether Surin believed there existed general support for such a proposal. Surin claimed that many people were interested in this type of a regional approach. However, he emphasized that the key to such a negotiation would be China. Surin offered that if the Chinese changed their approach and pressured the Burmese to sit down and talk with the UN, ASEAN, and other players, it would greatly benefit all involved. Until now China's public stance had been to keep other countries from becoming involved in what China viewed as Burma's domestic problem.

¶9. (C) A/S Hill countered that many people had called for China to do more about Burma, but the situation was much too complicated; simply asking one country to intervene would

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not lead to a solution. Hill agreed with Surin's desire to engage China on Burma; however, China's economic interests in Burma were the driving force behind its dealings with the Burmese junta. This constrained Chinese influence. At the same time, due to the 2,100 kilometer border between China and Burma, the Chinese shared Thailand's concerns about the spillover effects of Burma's persistent decline. DAS Marciel added that the Chinese recognized the need for some kind of political change inside Burma to ensure continued stability, and that the USG had emphasized in meetings with the Chinese that such a change did not have to happen overnight.

¶10. (C) Surin replied that the prudent approach was to recognize the positive efforts the Chinese had made to date. A/S Hill said that UN Special Envoy for Burma Ibrahim Gambari had to clarify his objectives and his needs to give the Chinese, and others, a precise goal that they could support. A/S Hill emphasized that, even more important, Gambari needed to be able to freely come and go from Burma to allow him to fully focus on the task at hand. Surin mentioned that he would be traveling to Beijing on March 17 and that he planned to pass the message of the importance of ASEAN and China working together to resolve the situation in Burma.

¶11. (U) A/S Hill cleared this cable.  
JOHN